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ABSTRACT

A researcher who is also a college teacher reflects on the personal meaning of research and the relationship between researcher and subject. As teacher-researchers embark on the process of discovery, they engage in relationships with informants. Developing these relationships requires implicit moral and ethical responsibility, mutual respect, and reciprocity. Relationships become the central focus of interpretative research where all participants collaborate as researchers and learners. The ethics of building relationships with informants requires researchers to disclose their intentions fully and to regard informants as co-learners. The researcher's experience in a study involving Latinas illustrates the complexities of the researcher-informant relationship and the importance of cultural sensitivity in the research process. (Contains 14 references.) (SLD)

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A Journey of Inquiry: A Researcher's Personal Narrative

"I'm not sure what it was; maybe my last name; I'm not sure. It was always me. I felt like - why is she (teacher) always picking on me? Now that I'm older, I think that it might have been discrimination. I'm very sensitive; I felt like crying. (It happened) Enough times to stay with me. It doesn't bother me now; people were not educated; maybe they didn't know how to deal with kids." (Cora, Azusa Pacific University, November 1994).

In my own education, when I was a child - this is sad. I came from a bilingual home. My grandmother spoke to me in Spanish. I went to school; I knew English, but because I was Hispanic, I was treated very bad. My first experience was in Kindergarten, and the teacher slapped me in the face. ... When I was in first grade, just because I was Hispanic, the teacher didn't even care, and she threw a book in front of me. I'll never forget it as long as I live. And she told me

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to read. There was a lot of prejudice against Hispanics, back then. ... My heart has always been with children that are minorities because
of what I went through; and I don't wish that upon anyone else. And I'm very cautious how (schools) treat those minorities. That's very important to me. (Lourdes, Azusa Pacific University, Interview, November 1994)

"When I was a child in Mexico, learning to communicate with my family, friends, and other people involved in my life, language brought me feelings of pride and joy. My first years of language development were very satisfying. At the age of six, my experiences with language changed dramatically! I moved to California ... When I moved to this country I brought my customs, my experiences, and my language. These qualities were not appreciated by the members of my new community. When I used my language to try to communicate with my peers, I was ridiculed. ... This workshop has helped me build my confidence in writing. ... all this built confidence and skills will effect the way in which I teach my students. I can pass on my attitude ! (Monica, Azusa Pacific University, Summer 1995).

The voices of these people are not just interesting anecdotes. Their thoughts and reflections really matter; they are powerful insights in helping researchers and informants make sense of the world around us. Listening to the voices of these students led the researchers to

wonder about the meaning of research in terms of framing inquiry questions, gathering data collection, analyzing the findings.

When one envisions the traditional concept of research, three images come to mind - the big "R" (Hubbard & Power, 1993), number crunching, and the "lone ranger" (Wasser & Bresler, 1996). The lone researcher searching for the truth in vast, dusty volumes of lonely, dark libraries. The researcher / professor, the insider, owner of knowledge and member of the academia who advises the classroom teacher, the outsider in the intellectual arena. Cochran-Smith & Lytle developed a comparative chart to illustrate the division between research on teaching (university professors) and teacher research (k-12 practitioners). Salient points involve theoretical frameworks - discipline based in university research; practice based for k-12 teachers). Another point relates to data collection, analysis, and reporting. Academic research has focused primarily on quantitative studies, standard paradigms, and professional detachment or objectivity of the researcher; in recent years there has been increased interest in qualitative methodology in the academia. Teacher research is mostly qualitative and interpretative, introducing new paradigms, and accepting of researcher subjectivity. The apparent lack of connection between research professors and teacher researchers has led to a limited perspective of research. However, as researchers deconstruct their practices (Wasser & Bresler, 1995), develop new ways of knowing, and focus on relationships with informants and other investigators, research is emerging through new lenses and partnerships.

Qualitative inquiry is being conducted by groups of researchers working collaboratively, leading to the development of relationships among researchers and with informants. Education professors and practicing teachers are collaborating in action research. Teachers realize that they too can be researchers in their own classrooms, collect and analyze data, and share results with a community of learners and inquirers.

Rigor, convention, and standards are also controversial points between research on teaching and teacher research. Traditionally standards for methodological rigor have become ideological paradigms which dictate generalizations. Academic researchers tend to doubt the relevancy of research questions posed by practicing teachers, as well as the legitimacy of theoretical grounding of interpretative research. "If, however, we limit the notion of theory to more traditional university-based definitions, research by teachers may be seen as atheoretical, and its value for creation of the knowledge base on teaching may be circumscribed." (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, p.17) The valuable contribution of teacher research in the praxis of teaching and learning, and in defining the role of teachers is outlined by Goswami and Stillman: "They collaborate with their students to answer questions important to both, drawing on community resources in new and unexpected ways. The nature of classroom discourse changes when inquiry begins." (Goswami & Stillman, 1987, Preface).

Cochran-Smith & Lytle point out that teacher research has included both empirical and conceptual research, contributing to theoretical paradigms, as well as interpretation of data, reflection, and explorations of relationships. (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, p.27)

As teachers-researchers embark on the process of discovery in search of truths, they engage in relationships with informants. Developing relationships requires implicit moral and ethical responsibility, mutual respect, and reciprocity. As a result of wondering together, teacher-researchers are finding the richness of diversity of perspectives brought about by looking at research issues from multiple lenses. One might wonder "what is the purpose of teacher research?" Cochran-Smith and Lytle argue that teacher research can bring about social change and alter classrooms in terms of the notions of knowledge base and pedagogy which will affect language and literacy education in pluralistic democracies. (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, p. xiv)

The notion of knowledge and generating local and public knowledge are also discussed by Cochran-Smith & Lytle who argue that reflective inquiry in a democratic community of learners means that teachers and students explore learning from a constructivist view taking into account prior experiences and subjective interpretations. Through guided inquiry, teachers and learners help shape curriculum, examine social issues, and contribute to school reform. Local knowledge is generated within the community of learners (classroom) and shared with the larger (public) community

of educators. Qualitative methodology assists researchers in discovering important questions, processes, and relationships.

Relationships become the central focus of interpretative research where all participants collaborate as researchers and learners. Traditionally informants have been seen as outsiders (those to be observed or studied), not fully aware of the researchers objectives. Relationships with informants are affected by the social dimensions and political contexts in which research takes place. Investigators must be respectful of informants, communicate honestly their research intentions, and avoid the participant-observer syndrome. A participant-observer position creates an unequal relationship where the researcher is the "knower," thus, objectifying the informant who is left in a powerless position. "Objectivity" becomes the buzz word for validity in research circles; ignoring the fact that interpretative research requires subjectivity and reciprocity in a transactional context in which the "knowing" or meaning arises from the relationship between the "knower" and the "know." Theory building is always evolving, being shaped by experiences and transactions among teachers, students, and parents within the context of schooling. (Patterson et al, 1990, pp. 42-43) "This collective theory is grounded in data from authentic classroom contexts and mediated by the explicit personal theories of all those involved." (Patterson et al, 1990, p.45) Experiences in authentic classroom contexts generated by the relationship between teachers and learners leads us to identify and focus on specific research questions. Attempting to answer these questions will contribute to

the development and application of new theories of teaching and learning.

In general researchers have paid little attention to the personal side of research - the ethical responsibility of building relationships with informants. Are these relationships forged to meet the needs of a research study and a researcher's agenda? What is our responsibility as researchers in the relationship between investigator and informer? As researchers, we may need to look at "doing" research as part of our mission for bringing about social justice. If so, then our relationship with informants should be honest, reciprocal, and transactional. Moral and ethical considerations arise when researchers' hidden agendas contribute to an almost concealment "conspiracy", however subtle, and questionable clandestine methods of collecting data. William B. Shaffir writes: "Researchers frequently pretend to participate more fully in a community's activities when in fact they are detached observers. And often they ask deceptively innocent questions to gather data that would not otherwise be readily available. Such deceptive practices, I believe, are as inherent in field research as they are in day-to-day life". (Shaffir, Managing, 1991, p. 80).

Engaging in qualitative / interpretive research leads to varying degrees of intimacy in the development of relationships between investigators and informants. Some of these relationships may, in effect, develop into friendships. Friendship implies honesty, reciprocity, and trust. The sincerity of such relationships comes

into question in view of researcher's report of his "friendship" with a group of teachers:

"... From this came accounts of their life and work in the department ... accounts of what occurred in their classes. Yet friendships require mutual sharing and obligation. I found that I was able to discuss aspects of my analysis with these teachers but that I had to signal which elements of my work were closed from view, which sets of data were not for public discussion. In this sense, these friendships allowed me access to some data that I would not otherwise have obtained. Similarly, the individuals with whom I associated obtained access to areas of school life that they did not have normally. (Burgess,1991, p. 51) Burgess argues that although building friendships with informants opens access to research data, it can pause concerns: "... how to account for the influence of the relationship on the data collected and how to account for his or her position at the research site in relation to other participants." (Burgess, 1991, pp. 51-52)

The ethics of building relationships with informants requires researchers to fully disclose their intentions and to regard informants as co-inquirers or co-learners seeking to better know themselves and to impact their communities. Researchers need to co-exist with informants in a climate of mutuality and self-respect, recognizing the complexity of human relationships. Peter McLaren adds " ... the researcher must also attempt to be critical of the assumptions that inform the moral authority that shapes his or her

own analysis." (McLaren, 1991, p. 156) Doing research with culturally different populations requires researchers to abandon the concept of defining reality according to white, Western perspectives, thus assuming a privileged position over informants (and even condescending attitudes); we must "locate the other in ourselves through self-reflection." (McLaren, 1991, p.162) As co-inquirers and co-collectors of data, we also become co-reflectors and co-analysts, and ultimately, co-constructers of knowledge. Carol Christ adds: "The root of our scholarship and research is eros, a passion to connect, the desire to understand the experience of another, the desire to deepen our understanding of ourselves and our world ..." (Christ, 1987, p. 58)

Consequently there is a need for honoring the roles of informants; valuing self-honesty and reciprocity; and respecting the cross-cultural dimensions of the relationship. How do we define our role as Christian researchers, regarding ethical and moral considerations, while maintaining validity and reliability in supporting a mutual journey in the search for truth? In identifying informants, researchers must ensure the informants' choice in participating in the study and willingness to become co-inquirers and learners. Reciprocity in research relationships is essential to help establish trust and to avoid feelings of exploitation from the informants' point of view. Another emerging category in intimate, reciprocal relationships between researchers and informants is the measure of vulnerability in both camps in which Asher and Fine describe:

"Ultimately, by entering field settings and establishing relations with others, we discover some measure of vulnerability that is often so dominant in the lives of subjects. For even as we strive mightily to be researchers, we learn that, after all, we are but human beings. (Asher & Fine, 1991, p. 205)

The author can account for intimate moments during the research inquiry in which participants (researcher and informants) felt free to express vulnerability in their common journey of self-discovery. As a researcher who is conducting a longitudinal study (with non-Hispanic faculty members), I felt the angst, ambivalence, and discomfort of engaging in a research relationship with Hispanic (primarily Mexican-American) informants whose ethnic and linguistic characteristics were similar to my own Portuguese-American background. Sometimes it was painful to identify with the informants in terms of experiences in prejudice and discrimination; to avoid being caught in destructive victimization, while recognizing injustices and encouraging empowerment strategies. While there are differences in our cultural backgrounds, the many similarities often catches me amidst the turmoil of cultural marginality - assuming the roles of both investigator and informant. In empathizing with some of the challenges facing the informants, I was faced with my own struggles for identify and belonging in a common journey of self-discovery. The discernment of feeling "caught" between two cultures posed adjustment challenges which I can identify in myself, as well as the informants.

Perhaps one the most salient points of the research is the ability to decide how much of the information revealed is authentic, how much is "saving face," and how much is not shared - considered private, family business. As I, inadvertently, begin to envelop myself in the research, I consider the ethical issues of the study - the sincerity / legitimacy of the research, the validity of our "discoveries," and the degree of intimacy with the informants. And although, we, as researchers, hope to create a "legally and morally correct" environment, we cannot be totally unbiased in our findings and implications. Biases and subjectivity are expected in qualitative, interpretive research studies. However, just as researchers and informants are seen as co-inquirers and learners, their conclusions must also be collaborative endeavors.

In order to bring greater legitimacy and authenticity to my research with the Weingart scholars, I relied on opinions and suggestions of researchers, some of them Hispanic themselves, who have done research with Hispanic populations. Marin and Marin's work, Research with Hispanic Populations, for example, offers many insights. They caution researchers not to make assumptions and generalizations for all Hispanic populations, based on a study with a particular Hispanic group. After all there are differences in culture and language within Hispanic/ Latino groups. The authors point out that even the word Hispanic which refers to ethnicity and not race, may not be accepted by all Latino immigrants - Mexican-Americans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and others.

Marin and Marin agreed on certain values and characteristics common to Hispanic populations: Allocentrism (preference for intimate, nurturing, and respectful interpersonal relationships); simpatia (generally avoiding conflict, emphasizing pleasant social interaction, showing respect and dignity for others); familialism (strong identification with nuclear and extended family); gender roles (somewhat male dominated); power distance (maintenance of "respeto" in interpersonal relationships), and time (less adherence to rigorous schedules). (Marin, 1991, pp. 11-17) All of these values and characteristics will affect relationships in research with Hispanic populations.

In my relationship with this group of Latinas, I found that these characteristics played an important role in framing questions, collecting data, and analyzing findings. During our interviews / conversations, I sometimes felt that my questions may have been offensive or demeaning for the informants. Such an example would be concerning the educational level of family members. I was unsure if some of the responses were influenced by allocentrism, familialism, and simpatia. I wondered if some of the responses were less than candid because the women wished to provide socially acceptable answers, while protecting the privacy of family members. At such times I identified culturally with the informants - I am not sure how much I would be willing to divulge about myself or my family; or to allow myself to be the "subject" of a study. My subjectivity and empathy become even more apparent when informants shared instances of ethnic and linguistic discrimination.

My own painful experiences surfaced, making it difficult, at times, to continue my role of researcher. However, I felt that my cultural commonalities with these informants enabled us to develop a higher level of intimacy, trust, and reciprocity. Some of the women felt comfortable enough to address me by my first name, however, the majority still call me "Dr. Pacino." They needed to make these choices according to their level of comfort with me. I realized that although they saw me as a friend, while they also respect my position as university professor. I also knew that my level of familiarity with them needed be void of condescending attitudes. After almost three years of developing a relationship of mutual trust and respect, we had been able to show some vulnerability - they had been able to cry in front of me and I in front of them. One of the most interesting part of our relationship was our religious affiliation. As Roman Catholics in a predominantly Evangelical Protestant campus, we had been able to affirm our Christian faith. Our reciprocal relationship had enabled us to become co-learners on a common journey. My uncertainty, discomfort, and subjectivity in conducting this research continued; I knew that these emotions / feelingswere part of a process of self-discovery for the informants and for me as the researcher. I also knew that I could provide my co-researchers with an additional cultural lenses.

Marin and Marin suggest effective ways for conducting research with Hispanic populations:

"The use of same-ethnicity research personnel (interviewers, experimenters, observers, etc.) will enhance the quality of the data and the rates of participation in the study. Minority research participants should be compensated for their efforts in proportion to

the demands placed upon them by the researchers. In collecting survey data, ... Telephone interviews are not only more economical but may provide more valid responses, especially when the survey deals with sensitive or highly personal topics." Marin & Marin, 1991, p. 60). "Investigators should be careful to avoid over-generalizing to all Hispanics when the individuals studied belong to a very specific subgroup." (Marin & Marin, 1991, p. 41)

> When planning studies with members of unfamiliar ethnic or cultural group, researchers should immerse themselves in all aspects of the culture so that they are able to perceive the world from the perspective of the individuals being studied.
>
> To gain knowledge about a new ethnic group, the researcher should contact social scientists or key informants who can provide validity checks on the researcher's observations.
>
> Researchers need to become familiar with basic writings in the social sciences concerning the group being studied. (Marin & Marin, 1991, p. 74).

Implications - Let us:

* Be aware of researchers' roles and the roles of informants.

* Understand the importance and value of relationships based on reciprocity, honesty, and trust.

* Raise the degree of intimacy between researchers and informants.

* Be aware and sensitive when working with culturally diverse populations, in terms of ethnicity, language, socioeconomic status, gender, and religion.

* Be aware of researchers' possible condescending attitudes toward informants.

* Be aware of informants' level of disclosure, and possible tendency to provide socially desirable responses.

* Allow informants co-choice in research involvement, as co-inquirers / co-learners.

* Consult informants and include their input in developing and revising research protocols (interview questions, surveys, data collecting and analysis).

* Try divergent ways of gathering data.

* Challenge researchers hidden assumptions, especially in working with culturally different populations.

* Be willing to share researcher's vulnerabilities with informants.

* View research as a mutual journey - coming to know together and wondering; and an opportunity for personal growth for researchers and informants.

Another potential consideration of the social process, is whether or not, or the degree to which the researcher may or may not become a moralizer in dealing with culturally different contexts (even when faced with controversial issues / situations). Yet another ethical consideration is the fact that most research on cultural minorities has been done by Anglo researchers. We need more minority researchers doing studies on their own cultural groups, as well as on other groups, including Anglo populations. Researchers also need to develop culturally appropriate instruments - not offensive to cultures being studied. Analysis of findings and writing conclusions must also be culturally sensitive and non-condescending. As researchers, we must take joy in supporting a mutual journey of self-discovery and in sharing our stories.

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